

These notes are intended as ways in which pupils can explore Theresa Breslin's novel, *Remembrance*.

That exploration may take the form of discussion, writing or drama.

Although certain passages have been highlighted as being especially pertinent to the subject under discussion, it is recommended that pupils read the novel in its entirety.

Remembrance

BY THERESA BRESLIN

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The First World War started in 1914 and ended in 1918.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that it was more than a war between nations. It was a conflict between an old and a new world. There were those who had faith in the necessity of war as a means of establishing the correct world order. But when it was over, and peace had been declared, few could justify the colossal loss of life. The optimism that accompanied those troops as they marched off to fight the enemy seems naïve when held up against the reality of the conflict, the carnage of the trenches and the battlefields of Europe.

But wars aren't simply about those fighting at the fronts. Wars are also about those continuing to live in homes from which father and sons, husbands and sweethearts have gone, some never to return. World War I provided an opportunity for some women to work outwith the home for the first time in their lives, giving them a sense of independence they might never otherwise have had. It also made people question the way they lived their lives, the way they expressed themselves and the way they interacted with other people.

Remembrance is about all these things.

'At this time of a new century I thought it was important to write this book. I wanted to show the many and complex aspects of war. The soldier who firmly believes he is doing his duty and is prepared to sacrifice his life to protect his family. The soldier, disillusioned, who feels his very soul is being corrupted by contact with militarism.'

'The girls who went to nurse, wanting to help the war effort or looking for adventure, and finding in some cases a self-fulfilment they never would have had if the war had not occurred. And... the terrible grief of those left behind.'

Theresa Breslin is a writer renowned for the depth of her research. But her books are always character-driven. With *Remembrance*, the result is an immensely readable novel, rooted in the reality of the communities through which she delivers her plots.

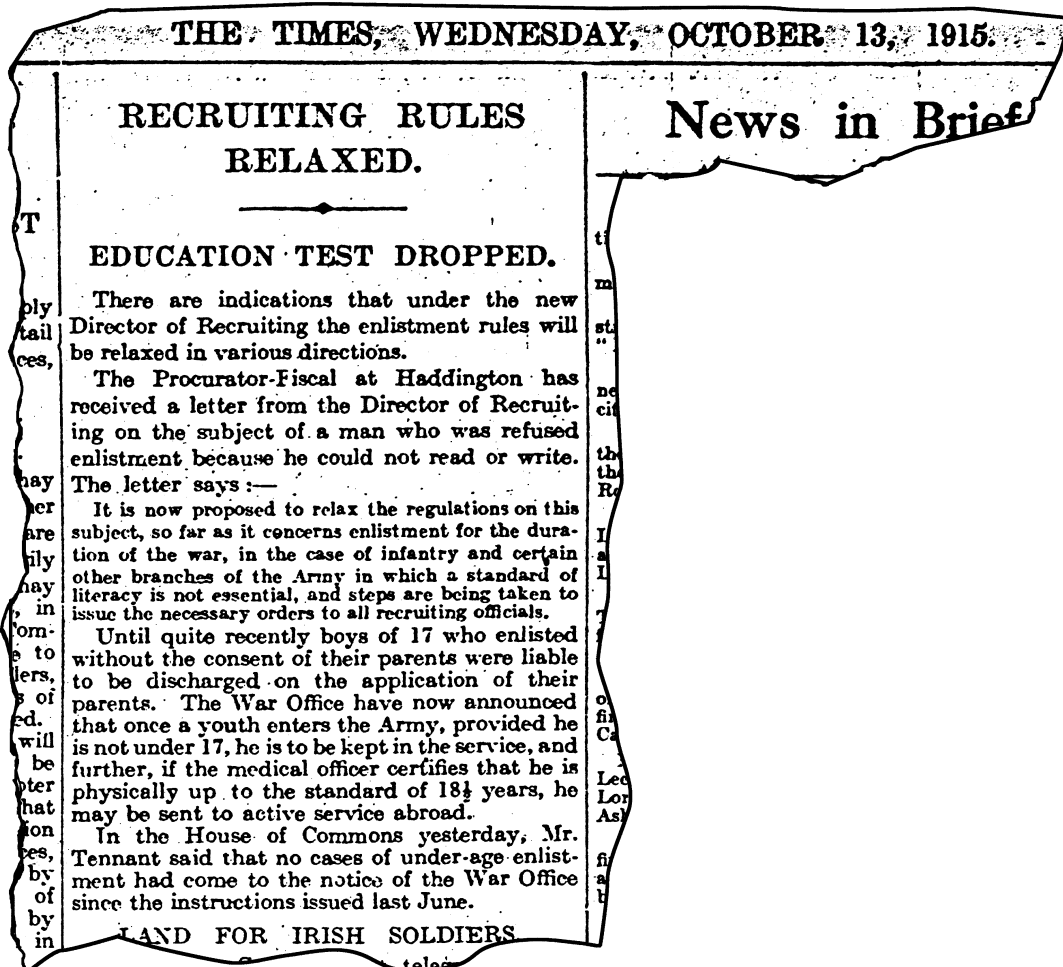
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Courage and Pacifism

Francis Armstrong-Barnes refuses to join up, so strongly does he hate the idea of warfare (p95-97). There is an element of shame in this (p100-103). Alex is utterly determined that he will be a soldier (p110-112).

- Write down the reasons behind Francis' decision.
Do you have sympathy with his standpoint?
Would you be influenced by public opinion?
- Francis is given the opportunity to put his case (p95-101).
What are his objections?
On what grounds is he granted a temporary exemption?
Was that decision a fair one?
- Who is more courageous - Francis in refusing to join up with his peers or Alex for joining up against his parents' wishes (p208-211)?
- What would you consider a courageous act and why?



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Role of women

Maggie had to fight hard to persuade her father that she should go to work in the munitions factory. Later, when she has decided to go into nursing, she writes to Francis to tell him of her decision, and of her newfound, hard-fought confidence in herself (p162-163).

- Why didn't Maggie think of nursing in the first place?
- Why was her father so antagonistic towards his daughter's decisions?
- Write a conversation Maggie's father might have with a friend in which he tells of his daughter's decision.
- Why is Maggie embarrassed by her father when he takes her with Charlotte to the train at Waverley Station?

Class and social structure

World War I shook the class system that had dominated British society to the core. It didn't destroy it, but the war weakened the hold of the ruling classes because, in general, nobody was unaffected by its implications.

Mrs Armstrong-Barnes is almost comic in her snobbish attitudes, but she illustrates the distance such people would put between themselves and those they considered less significant. However even she recognises that things have changed (p174-175).

- Why might Maggie be apprehensive about visiting Stratharden House?
- What is the significance of the brusque response she gives Mrs Armstrong-Barnes?
- When Mrs Armstrong-Barnes says, '*...my place was to see to the things that enhanced life...*', what do you think she meant?
And in what way would they now be 'inappropriate'?

Charlotte and Francis recognise the iniquities of the social system that has served their family so well, but they are not always sensitive in their forays into the wider community. Compare the way in which the author writes their dialogues, and the dialogues of Maggie and her parents.

- How does she portray their different personalities?

Compare John Malcolm's letter with those of Francis, or Maggie's letter with those of Francis.

- How does the author use language, vocabulary and tone to denote the differing personalities?

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A good example of the discomfort between the different social strands is the relationship between Maggie and Charlotte. Charlotte is an assured, articulate young lady while Maggie is less confident and more restrained. Charlotte and Maggie's brother, John Malcolm, have become close prior to his departure for the front - a relationship on which both families would have frowned as being inappropriate. Maggie is also jealous of the attention her brother gives Charlotte (p109-110)

■ What about Charlotte's behaviour would irritate Maggie?

■ Is Charlotte's behaviour intended to upset Maggie?

The two girls are brought closer through their shared grief at John Malcolm's death.

■ Why?

■ When Maggie is told of the circumstances surrounding her brother's death (p248-251), she feels it is important that Charlotte should know? Why?

What does this say about the state of the two young women's friendship?

Maggie has become close to Francis, but he is very different to John Malcolm. Their relationship operates on a different basis.

■ What is it about Francis that appeals to Maggie?

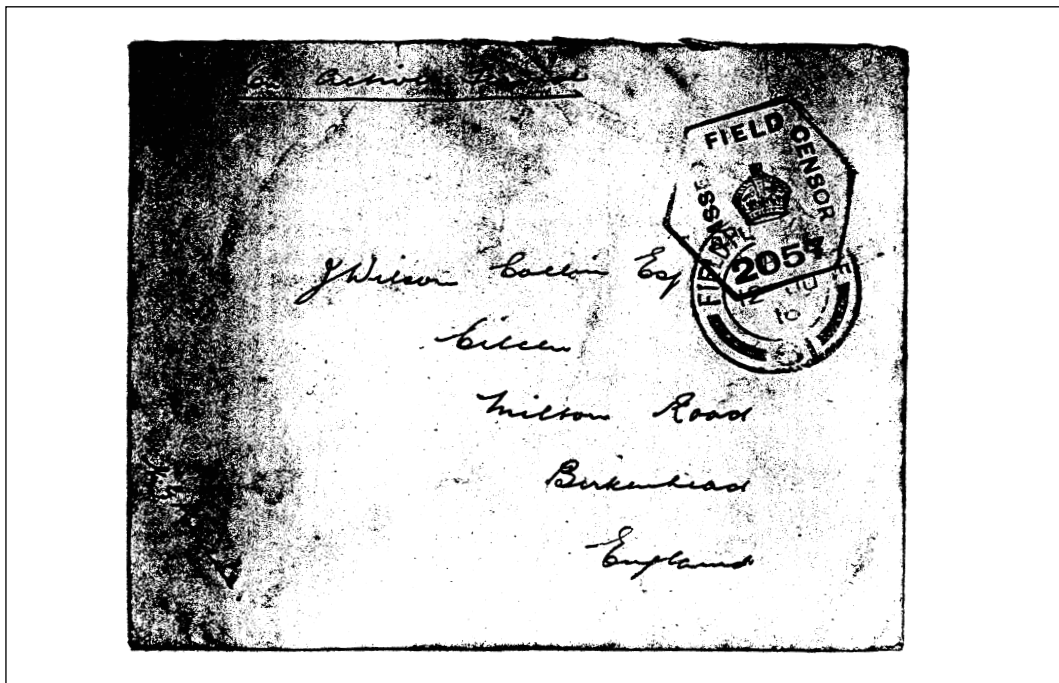
How does the author convey the understanding between the two characters?

■ Why might she feel intimidated by his letters (p144-149)?

What elements of Francis' life are likely to have been missing from Maggie's?

■ What persuades Maggie to write to Francis?

What is her solution to the problem of what to write?



Envelope of letter dated 11 June 1916: extract on next page

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WW1 Correspondence- extracts from the letters of a young soldier killed on the Somme in 1916

Letter to family dated 11th June 1916, telling family of code he'll use to let them know if he is in the trenches

... I'm keeping quite in the pink and hope you are the same. By the way just to save time in writing in future, if I am in the trenches I shall underline the words On Active Service twice, when in rest, once. This is not to evade the Censor but just to save time.

Well, Dad, I must close now,
With Warmest Love
Ken

Envelope for this letter is on previous page

Last letter from Ken to his Mother, dated 8th October 1916

...Well, I can't tell you how relieved I was to get your letter today, - I've not had one for about six days and was beginning to get anxious. I don't know how long mine are taking to get home.

Well goodnight my Dear Mother,
God Bless You this and all Sunday nights.
Ever Your Devoted
Ken

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The Glory of War

When Corporal Eric Kidd tells Alex, ‘Get revenge out of your head and make room for your heart to grieve,’ what does he mean?

- To what extent is war about revenge?

Neither Alex nor Francis is open about the realities of the war they’ve endured (p300-302).

- Why do they ‘protect’ their families from the truth?
- Discuss their reasons and whether you feel they are justified.

World War I inspired such poets as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Their poetry provided an insight to war that has made a deep impression. Read some of their poetry and compare what it tells you with some of the letters Francis wrote to Maggie. What similarities are there?

- What do you feel about war?
- Would you join up? Why? Why not?
- How would you define patriotism?
- Do you believe you are a patriot? Why? Why not?

Art and Literature

The challenges of the friendship between Francis and Maggie in many ways epitomise the social differences inherent in British life at the time of World War I. Their attitudes to the arts provide further insight (p144 – p148) Francis describes his environment in the terms of an artist and Maggie is at a loss as to how to reply. Francis’ assumption that Maggie is familiar with Kipling’s writing causes her to review her attitude to reading ‘unless it was a recipe or an account’.

- Why was Maggie so dismissive of fiction?

Maggie decides to respond to Francis by finding out about the artists and writers with whom he is familiar (p168-p173).

- Why is Maggie reluctant to use Francis’ family library?
Do you sympathise with her? Why?
- Why does Maggie consider her life ‘completely altered, both mentally and physically’?
Today, everybody can join a public library from the day they’re born, and books are relatively cheap to buy.
Why do you think access to books had such an impact on Maggie?

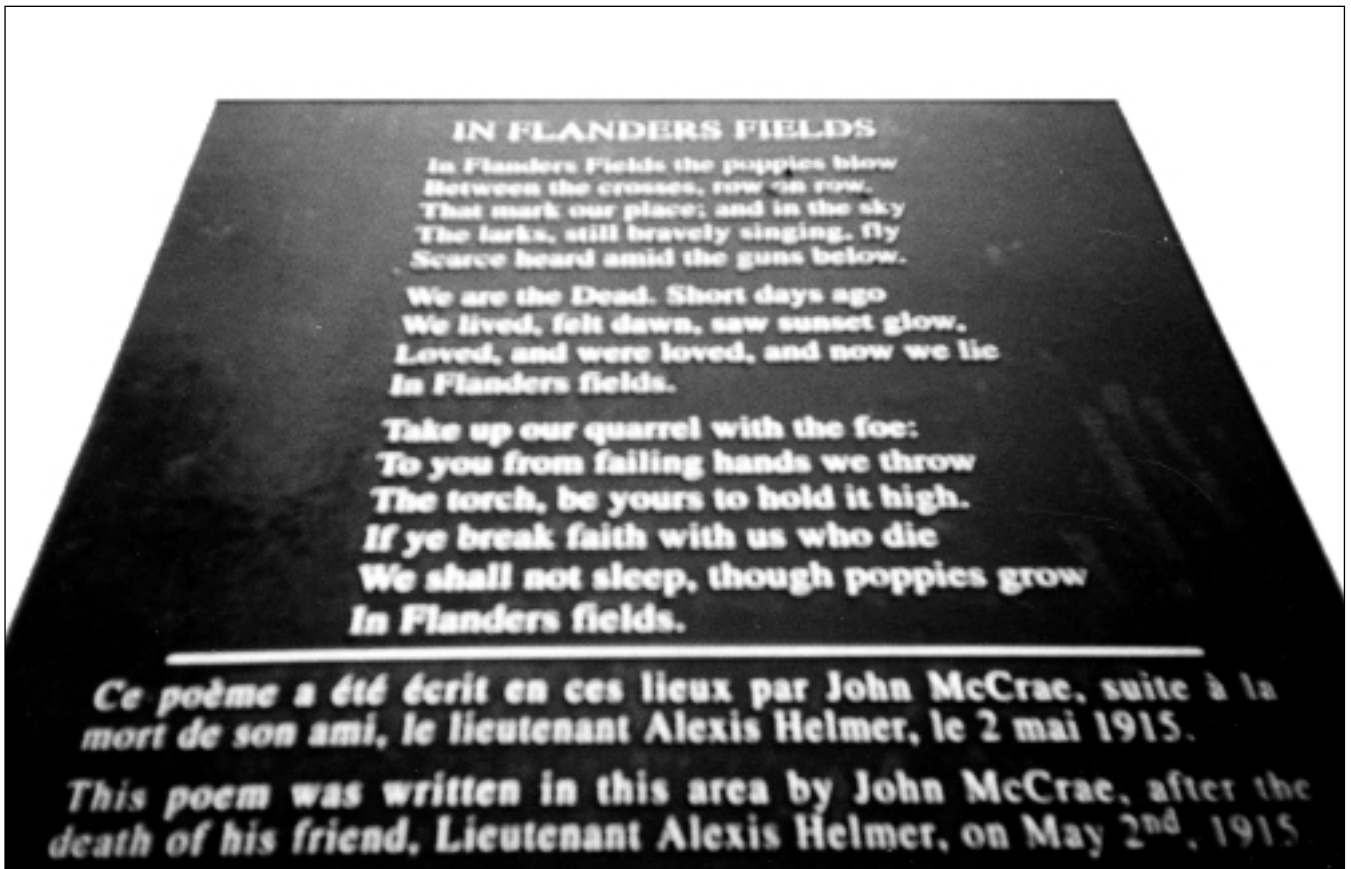
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Maggie's view of war is largely drawn from Francis' descriptions in his letters. Gradually, by familiarising herself with the work of the artist Goya (p176-177), and through her visits to galleries in London, she absorbs other images of war. It is the revelation of Siegfried Sassoon's collection of poems, *The Old Huntsman* (p227), that enables her to communicate with greater understanding with Francis.

Siegfried Sassoon, together with Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen, challenged the landscape of war as a forum for heroes and triumph.

- Read some of their poems and consider their impact on a public whose perception was often so much simpler than the reality.



Photograph of plaque with "In Flanders Fields" poem outside Ypres where the poet John McCrae, a Canadian doctor, worked.

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Today, we watch wars unfold on the television and listen to 24-hour radio coverage in which single and multiple casualties are reported by hundreds of reporters stationed in the war zone.

- What do you feel about media coverage of conflict?
- Having read of brothers and sons lost in *Remembrance*, do you feel that the families of today's soldiers have benefited from the blanket coverage now available?
- Do you think today's war reports are censored?
Do you think the war reports during World War I were censored?
Do you believe that censorship is justified in the case of war reporting?

Remembrance is, of course, fiction. But authors of historical fiction of this kind need to be meticulous in their research.

- Why is research necessary?
- What do you think the author wanted you to think about when she planned and wrote *Remembrance*?
- Has it changed your opinions about war?
About social class?

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Information

We live in a world in which information can be moved at remarkable speeds. We have easy access to 24 hour news channels plotting events world-wide, offering opinions and interpretations on which we base our understanding of world events. That information often arrives within minutes of the events which generate it.

Compare this with the means of communication available to both the forces fighting at the fronts and their families and friends awaiting news at home during World War I. What means of communication are available in the 21st Century that weren't available during World War I? What effect do these new technologies have on our awareness of what is going on in the world?

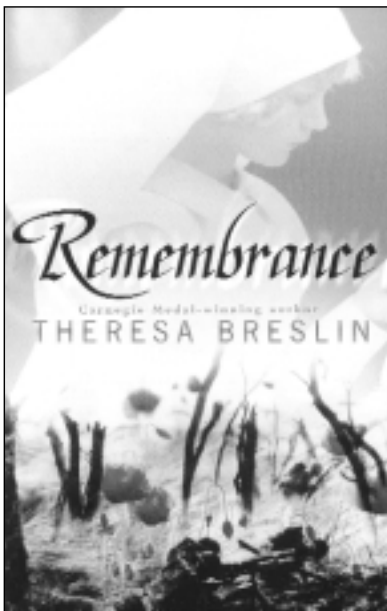
Francis' letters provide an insight into war with which many at the time would have disapproved. Today there are accusations of 'spin' - news management which sheds a positive light on events which could otherwise discredit the government - do you think there was 'spin' during World War I?

Compare Alex's expectations of war with what he found when he got there. Was he a victim of 'spin' in which war was glorified?

Theresa Breslin read letters and newspapers as part of her extensive research for Remembrance - to find out more, look at her website -

www.theresabreslin.com

Would you recommend *Remembrance* to your friends? Why?



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